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AUTHOR Henderson, Sarah A.
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ABSTRACT

College students who have had Advanced Placement (AP) English in high school often present motivational or other problems for instructors of first-year college composition. These students often resist instruction or have difficulty working successfully in writing groups with peers. However, often these students' work is not outstanding or even satisfactory. According to the scheme of cognitive development posited by William Perry, a key moment occurs as students move into a mode of contextual relativistic thinking, which is essential for success in college work. Perry's scheme, however, has met with some severe criticisms. In light of Perry's model, it may be that advanced placement students are struggling with issues of development and worldviews (about the AP English program, the AP placement test, their own abilities, and their own writing) not consistent with their own. These students often present the strong and disturbing impression of being developmentally stuck, and perhaps more dualistic in orientation than their counterparts. Cognitive-developmental theories suggest some recommendations for solving this problem. Teachers should invite their students to join with them as learners searching for better, but not absolute, answers. Teachers should remember that grading and evaluation can provide teachable moments for students. Assignment requirements and criteria should be explained before drafting starts. Group work and peer review should continue to be encouraged, despite initial resistance. Finally, instructors can recommend that advanced students be placed in honors courses, if available. The instructor, through openness, honesty, and concern, can demonstrate that the student can succeed and gain fulfillment. (Twenty-one references are attached.) (HB)

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Why Do I Have to Be Here?

The Advanced Placement Student in First-Year Composition: Problems and Issues in Cognitive Development

by

Sarah A. Henderson

University of Portland

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Why Do I Have to Be Here?
The Advanced Placement Student in First-Year Composition: Problems and Issues in Cognitive Development

Introduction

When I first began teaching first-year composition at the University of Portland, I was impressed by the diversity of students in my classroom. Some were international students; some were born and raised in Portland. Some had been star students in high school; for others, school had always been a struggle. I could understand why some of my students were having a difficult time learning to write for new purposes and audiences in college, but I remember one student I will call Mark who was having some special difficulties. His writing, while technically correct in many ways, still needed improvement in others. He vehemently resisted any suggestions I made for improvements, however, and would only grudgingly revise his drafts. He also had no interest in working with other students in group activities and peer reviews of drafts. I was astonished to find out in a conference with him that he had taken Advanced Placement English in high school. His writing actually did not seem all that advanced, and I was surprised by his resistance to learning more about writing. "Why do I have to be here?" he kept asking me about the course.

Mark, I came to see, was not alone among my students in his AP English background and in his rigid attitude. He was my introduction to what my colleagues and I came to call "the AP problem." It was in attempting to understand students like Mark that I found myself learning more about the Advanced Placement program and exploring issues of cognitive development in college students.

The Advanced Placement program of the Educational Testing Service began more than thirty years ago (Foster 3). The Advanced Placement program in English is the largest of the Advanced Placement programs; each year, more than 50,000 students take the Advanced Placement test in English (Vopat 52). The Advanced Placement test in English is not without controversy. For those interested in a lively discussion of varying views about Advanced Placement English, I would recommend reading the collection of essays in Advanced Placement English: Theory, Politics, and Pedagogy edited by Gary A. Olson, Elizabeth Metzger, and Evelyn Ashton-Jones. Many students do pass the Advanced Placement English test and exempt their first-year composition course, but some college and universities, including the University of Portland where I teach, do not accept a score on the Advanced Placement English test in lieu of freshman composition. In other cases, students must take freshman composition either because they did not score highly enough on the Advanced Placement examination or the university or college placement examination.

For whatever reason, students who have taken Advanced Placement English in high school frequently appear in first-year composition classes alongside students who have had no advanced or college preparatory work in secondary school. In my own classes, I have at least three or four such students out of a classes of 25 in each section I teach. It did not take me long to notice that these students sometimes present motivational or other instructional problems, problems that I discovered in conversations with colleagues were characteristic of the Advanced Placement students in their classes as well.

These students often resist instruction or have difficulty working successfully with peers in writing groups. They express resentment at being in a regular composition classroom and sometimes overtly state that they already know everything being taught even though (and this is an important point) their writing does not indicate that this is the case. They present in some ways the opposite problem from that teachers often see in basic writing students, who sometimes believe that they cannot learn anything about writing. My AP students believe that they already know it all. My AP students make comments like the following taken from transcripts of conferences.

"Why do I have to be here? I took AP in high school. We covered all this in high school."

"I know all the rules for writing. I passed the AP test. I can write on a college level. I'm only taking this course because the Registrar's Office says I have to."

"Other people in the class may need this course. But not me."

"There's no point sharing my writing in my peer critique group. They might see some grammar errors, but my writing's OK as it is."

"I got A's in AP English. Now I'm putting lots of time in writing papers, but only getting B's and C's. Why are you grading so tough?"

Of course, any student who can easily and effectively write the required papers in any composition class before taking the course should be exempted from the course and encouraged to take one at a higher level. But what puzzled my colleagues and me was that the AP students' work was often not outstanding or even satisfactory. And

yet we were faced with students who balked at our efforts to challenge them to learn more about writing than they presently knew.

Theoretical Background

I had already read William Perry work on cognitive development in college students and Mary Field Belenky et al.'s work on women's development. As I thought about my AP students, who are often indeed of high ability, I came to believe that their motivational and instructional problems could perhaps best be understood in terms of their cognitive development, with Perry's scheme of intellectual and ethical development in the college years being especially relevant.

As most of you know, in his studies with Harvard students, most of whom were men, Perry determined that students go through up to nine predictable stages (he prefers the term positions) of cognitive growth as they attempt to cope with the demands of a pluralistic college environment. He describes these nine positions or levels and their alternatives in his book Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme (59-200) and his article "Cognitive and Ethical Growth: The Making of Meaning" (78-96). These positions are generally classified into four groups called Dualism, Multiplicity, Relativism, and Commitment in Relativism and make up the Perry scheme.

The stages of the Perry scheme focus on how students use knowledge and authority and their own role in their decisions and how they make meaning. Students start from the Dualistic stages--in which there are clear right and wrong answers and Authority in the form of teachers knows the right answers which students must determine by hard work. Students then reach the Multiplicity stages--in which they recognize that knowledge is uncertain (the diversity of opinion at

most colleges often confronts students with an uncomfortable awareness of uncertainty about the right answer) and that even Authorities do not always have the right answer. In these stages, students believe that, because knowledge is uncertain, everyone has the right to his or her own opnion.

Only when students reach position 4 of Perry's scheme, a position which involves the beginning understanding of Relativism, do they see that knowledge is relative, that authorities do not know all the right answers, and that various frames of reference must be used to make meaning of information and ideas. Students thus come to realize that, as Perry articulates their thinking, "Authorities are not asking for the Right Answer; They want us to <u>think</u> about things in a certain way, <u>supporting</u> opinion with data" (Perry, "Cognitive" 79; his italics). In the final positions of the scheme, the Commitment in Relativism positions, students apply contextual relativistic thinking to other areas of their lives beyond school and to the commitments they make. They understand that they must make commitments in a relativistic world in which there is no certainty.

Perry felt the pivotal position was position 4. As you can see on this diagram, moving across to contextual relativistic thinking is an important watershed in human cognitive development. Achieving contextual relativistic thinking is probably essential for doing well in demanding college work. Certainly Janice N. Hays, Kathleen M. Brandt, and Kathryn H. Chantry suggest, for example, in their study of student argumentative writing that students at students at higher Perry levels write more effective argumentative essays.

Not all students reach all the stages, as the diagram also indicates. Some stay at various levels. The stress inherent in important transition to position 4, or Relativism, can cause the epistemological foundations of students' worlds to founder. This causes distress for nearly all students, but, for some, further progress is difficult. They may go into Temporizing, where they may not move for a year or more; Escape, where they experience alienation and avoid responsiblity and commitments; or Retreat, where they may engage in "avoidance of complexity and ambivalence by regression to Dualism" (Perry, "Cognitive" 80).

The Perry scheme is a cognitive-developmental theory like Belenky et al.'s theory of the stages women go through from Silence to Received Knowledge to Subjective Knowledge to Procedural Knowledge to Constructed Knowledge. Some theorists, like Joanne Kurfiss, believe Perry's ideas and those of Belenky et al. can be combined into a common, complementary model, while others, such as Janis Tesdesco, prefer to stress the distinctions. But both theories, like most other cognitive-developmental theories, are based on the concept that students and other knowers construct their own worldviews and see and interpret the world--including the world of college, teachers, classes, and assignments--according to those worldviews. Janice Hays, among other theorists, has discussed the types of writing teachers see from students at various positions according to the Perry scheme.

Perry's theory, along with other cognitive-developmental theories, have certainly met with criticism. Ann E. Bertoff and Patricia Bizzel, among others, have written critiques of Perry's work. Myra Kogen is one of the scholars who believe that students have

difficulty in college writing primarily because they do not yet know the conventions of academic discourse, not because of their level of cognitive development. Hays responds to critics of cognitive-developmental approaches in her thoughtful article "Models of Intellectual Development and Writing: A Response of Myra Kogen et al." Like Hays, I would point out that adult development is a well-researched phenomenon (11-12) and that developmentalists are not at all "anti-context" (16). Indeed, developmentalists stress the importance of the interaction between the individuals' worldview and the social context and the learning environment. Most developmentalists from Piaget onward have been constructivists; they believe that individuals construct interpretations of the world. Developmentalists would not accept simplistic positivist philosophical assumptions.

I fully agree with Kogen that many students do need to learn more about the conventions of academic discourse. The role of the teacher from a developmental perspective is a lively and important one. We have much to teach and much to share with our students. I welcome any approach that will help me understand my students more fully. In seeking to understand my students, I have found that, as Hays states, "a developmental perspective illuminates many student writing difficulties," ("Models" 18) as I believe it does for AP students.

Other critics have questioned what they see as an ethnocentric value system inherent in Perry's scheme. Our students do come to us from different parts of the world and from different social groups in the United States and have their own values systems. Few of us, however, would question that we want our students to engage in

critical thinking and to become more reflection and thoughtful about their reading and writing, central goals of developmentally designed curricula and the core curricula of most colleges and universities. As Perry says, "the values inherent in the scheme itself . . . [are] congruent with the commonly stated objectives of liberal education" ("Cognitive" 107). It is also important to remember that while cognitive development can be encouraged and teachers are clearly in a position to influence students, it is also true that cognitive maturity, like emotional and social maturity, cannot be forced. We cannot force our students into molds. They are too much their own people for that.

Indeed even to question or challenge someone's worldview, whether intentionally or not, is often to cause distress to the person who often will not remain passive at such a time. Although the transition to Position 4 can be especially stressful, challenges to the worldviews of students at any of the positions can cause anxiety, distress, and resentment--the same anxiety, distress, and resentment I was seeing in my AP students. Perry also stresses that students at various stages in their development can have either one of two attitudes toward authority. They can be in Adherence or in Opposition to authority.

Students in Adherence will often conform to their teachers' expectations and thus ironically often advance in cognitive development away from a dependence on authority sooner than students who are in Opposition. Adherent students may feel they are guilty of "academic prostitution" as a student called conformity in Belenky et al.'s book (89), but their conformity helps them learn a new way of

thinking which ultimately enables them to outgrow a view of their professors as absolute authorites. Students who are Oppositional will often see their instructors and other authority figures as bad or false authorities because are those instructors are challenging the students' worldviews of what is right and wrong and introducing uncertainty into a previously comfortable, or at least predictable, world.

In requiring AP students to take the regular first-year composition class and in suggesting that they have more to learn about college writing, we are telling them that their previous worldview about the AP English program, the AP placement test, their own abilities, and their own writing might not be accurate or complete. Their distress is thus more understandable. They are often argumentative students; Perry himself stresses in his book how argumentative Oppositional students can be. But there is a reasoning and a constructed worldview behind the argumentativeness that can be so frustrating to their instructors.

My beliefs that my AP students were struggling with issues of development and worldview were confirmed when I read an article, "Continuities in Cognitive Development: AP Students and College Writing," by Karen Spear and Gretchen Flesher. They describe their research with four groups of students: freshmen who did not take AP English and took a regular first-year composition course, freshmen who took AP English and then elected to enroll in an honors freshmen writing course, sophomores who took AP English and then the honors writing course, and sophomores who took AP English but elected not to take a writing course. Although Spear and Flesher's sample was small,

the AP students who had not taken a writing course were remarkably similar to the AP students I was seeing in my classes in terms of their attitudes about themselves and about writing. As Spear and Flesher describe them, "they manifest a sense of closure toward writing--that what is to be known about writing is limited to mastery of skills and they have mastered them" (p. 40) by their participation in the AP program. These students are also egocentric. Like my AP students, they frequently resist working in groups because they do not want to work "with people who are not as smart as they are" (p. 40). They view discussion "primarily as a means of checking out the rightness of . . . [their] own ideas" (40). They do not think in terms of helping others learn or learning from others.

I agree with Spear and Flesher that these students present "the strong and disturbing impression of being developmentally stuck" (41). While often bright and articulate, they "seem to have internalized years of teachers', parents', and peers' admiration for their accomplishments to the point that they have made themselves into static objects of academic achievement" (41). I believe further research would show that these students, despite their intellectual ability, are perhaps more Dualistic in orientation than some of their counterparts in the class who have not taken AP English because their attitudes toward knowledge and learning, the role of authority, the role of learners/peers, classroom atmosphere, and the role of evaluation seem characteristic of lower Perry levels according to the psychologists use to assess students (see Moore for an outline of the criteria). And whatever their Perry positions, these students are certainly Oppositional to us and to their classmates.

Recommendations

But even with their rigid and limited thinking about writing, all is not lost for these capable students. What roles can their teachers play in fostering their development? Cognitive-developmental theories again suggest some answers. We see these students at an important time in their lives. Spear and Flesher stress that "students intellectual development and . . . writing development continue dramatically throughout the first two years of college" (45-46) as they encounter the challenging environment of the university and become more cognizant of the range of academic prose. And it is during the freshmen and sophomore years that we usually see these students.

It is important to remember that these students are challenging, but rewarding. They themselves are going through a significant and sometimes painful change in their worldviews. Throughout his work, Perry expresses compassion for the struggles students can experience as they grow and learn. He stresses the importance of "a teacher's confirmatory offering of community" ("Cognitive" 109). We all experience growth and change, and as students learn when they enter the positions of Relativism, even as teachers, as authorities, we do not know all the answers. But we can invite our students to join with us as learners as we search for better, if not absolute, answers. Belenky et al. also stress the crucial importance of the presence of what they call "benign authorities" (90) for the fostering of the higher levels of cognitive development. We are not the Authorities with a capital A that our Dualistic and Multiplistic students want, expect, and sometimes define by themselves by opposing, but we can be

experienced learners and writers who encourage students to learn about writing. We help our students most, as Perry says in the title of one of his most moving articles by, "sharing in the costs of growth" ("Sharing" 267).

What specifically can teachers do to foster the cognitive and writing development of resistant AP students? My experience has led me to six recommendations that may help.

Recommendation #1. Remember that grading and evaluation can provide teachable moments for students.

Many AP students expect easy A's on papers, high grades they often have not earned. They are frequently convinced that they have nothing more to learn about writing. Although grading is not a popular subject and an activity many teachers would prefer to eliminate, Perry stresses the importance of grading in communicating to students the kind and level of thinking and writing they are expected to do in college. Although we ourselves would prefer that our students have other motivations, as students discover that knowledge is uncertain, it is their desire to know what teachers expect on papers that encourages them to rethink and expand their worldviews. As Perry puts it, students observe that "Authority continues to grade one student's answer against another's, even with respect to problems to which the Right Answer is unknown" (Forms 92). This observation can provide students with a sense of what Piaget called "disequilibrium" and can lead them to question their worldviews, thus fostering their cognitive development.

The disgruntled student who comes to your office with essay in hand seeking an explanation for a grade is often providing you with a

teachable moment. Perry emphasizes that "the teacher's most promising point of address is to the student's bewilderment about the grounds on which his work is evaluated" (Forms 211). This could be just the moment to explain that your college or university may expect a higher level of thinking and writing than the students has shown thus far and that indeed there is always more to learn about thinking and writing, that writing is a way of thinking and making meaning that can always be developed and improved.

Recommendation #2. This recommendation applies, of course, for all students, explain the assignment requirements and criteria for grading before drafting starts and, as Applebee and Langer recommend, carefully "scaffold" instruction, in other words, sequence and structure all learning efforts to be consonant with students' developing abilities.

AP students usually do require challenging and stimulating assignments. I prefer to let my students choose their own topics for papers whenever possible to allow for individual differences and preferences. AP students may do quite well on a topic too difficult for their peers to handle as long as it interests them.

Recommendation #3. Continue to encourage group work and peer review of drafts as part of your composition class even if AP students are disdainful at first.

Group work and peer review have clear benefits for all students in the classroom, including AP students. You may need to do some judicious selecting of group members to ensure good working relationships, but Perry stresses throughout his work that interacting with peers can expose students to the diversity of opinion and

pluralism found in most colleges and universities. Encountering diversity of opinion can loosen rigid student thinking about writing and the writing process. AP students may discover they can learn more about their writing from the responses of peers and that they themselves can help others learn.

Recommendation #4. Share your experience as a learner, a thinker, and a writer with all your students.

When my AP students talk with me in conferences about their frustrations or bewilderment with the class, I share my own experience as an honors English student with the frustrations of the first year of college. I too was not always pleased with my grades and wondered what my professors expected. I routinely bring in my own writing to class to show students that I myself struggle with writing, that I receive feedback from peers and editors, and that I must draft and revise my work. I try to stress writing as meaning making and as a process of making meaning that is recursive and constantly evolving. One can always make meaning more clearly and more effectively; one can always write better.

I also share with my students advice from Brenda Ueland who writes, "If you are never satisfied with what you write, that is a good sign. It means your vision can see so far that is hard to come up to it" (178). While many first-year composition students need encouragement to feel more confidence in their writing, AP students need to break the rigid mindset they have that they have learned all there is to know about writing. Perry himself emphasizes that teachers be open with students, sharing "their own thinking, groping, doubts" (Forms 213) to encourage Relativistic thinking.

Recommendation #5. Recommend placement in an honors or advanced composition course or writing-intensive freshman seminar if such a course exists in the college or university.

I would suggest, along with Spear and Flesher, that there is a place for an honors or advanced composition course or a writing-intensive freshman seminar. Spear and Flesher found that AP students who had taken an honors writing course were more mature in their cognitive development and in their writing (33-39). There is no doubt that AP English can be an excellent preparation for college, but many students find that college writing presents new demands for a higher level of skill and intellectual complexity as they write in various disciplines across the curriculum. As John Iorio warns, the AP test can sometimes result in "misplacement instead of advanced placement and . . . [allow] some students to pass who sorely need a college-level course" (145). I myself do not want encourage what he calls "the negative, even cynical attitude of students who believe that circumventing courses and hard work is the mark of high acumen" (145). Few students would be hurt, and most would clearly benefit from an advanced writing course.

Spear and Flesher argue that in some cases at least, AP English program has given students "the message . . . that they were finished developing as writers--a message that the decisiveness of the AP exam and subsequent waivers from college writing requirements unfortunately reinforce" (47). While probably no high school English teacher intends to convey to his or her AP students that they have nothing more to learn about college writing, some students, perhaps because of the level of their cognitive development, interprete the AP program

and test to mean that. But as Spear and Flesher found at least for some students and the AP students they profiled remind me of my own, "former AP students make . . . intellectual gains only by overcoming much of what they have learned, at least about writing, in AP" (47). Taking an honors or advanced writing course, therefore, can allow students to participate in a challenging class with stimulating classmates and instructors, a class that can help them think and move past their former limited ideas about writing.

For some of us, however, referring our AP students to an advanced composition class is not possible. We will be working with these students in our classes for some time. And they are, like all students, special in their own way. I have found that by following these recommendations that most of the time I am able to reach across their initial resistance and establish a friendly rapport with them and help them re-see writing not as a rule-bound activity or set of skills they have mastered, but as an ever-changing process of making meaning. As a writing instructor, I believe very much in the importance of the writing conference and working with students as closely as possible. As writing teachers, we have the opportunity to work more closely with our students. There is often no better time than when reading and discussing writing together both in the classroom and outside it to provide both the challenges and supports that Sanford stresses are necessary for encouraging development; students need to be challenged to learn more and to change rigid and limiting views while being supported in their efforts to handle complexity in the extent needed to be able take risks (Sanford qtd. in Kurfiss 64-65). Growing and learning, as we have seen, can be

intellectually risky and emotionally threatening processes, just as writing can also be intellectually risky and emotionally threatening. If we stand by our students, even when they are Oppositional and argumentative, we can share our own uncertainties with them and invite them to join us in the community of learners where they are welcome to make their own contributions. We must assure them by our openness, our honesty, and our concern for them as learners and writers, that they will find the journey ahead rewarding and fulfilling. As Gene H. Krupa says, "if we are asking students to stand their worlds on end, we must convince them that we will stand by while they do it" (20).

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